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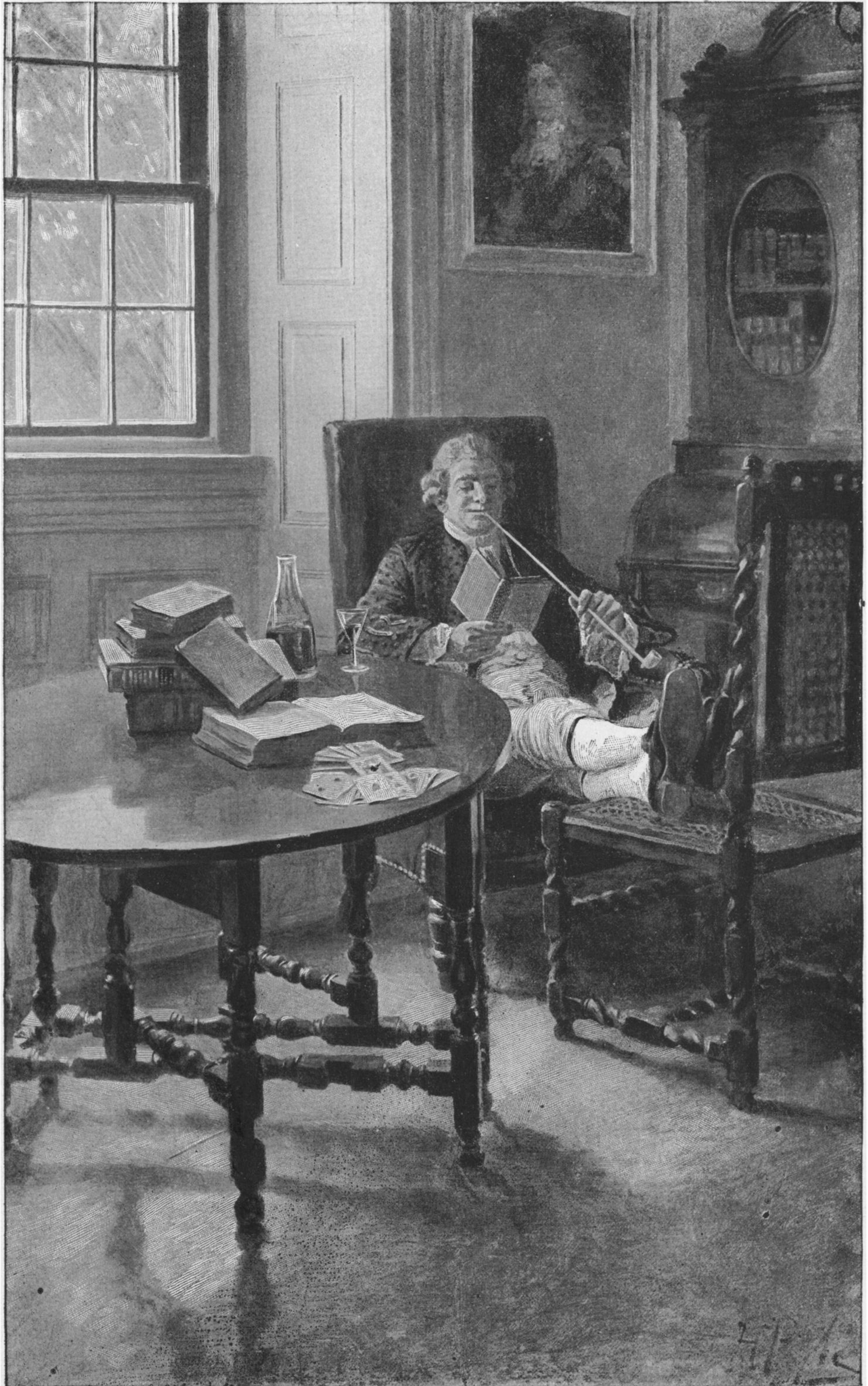

FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE

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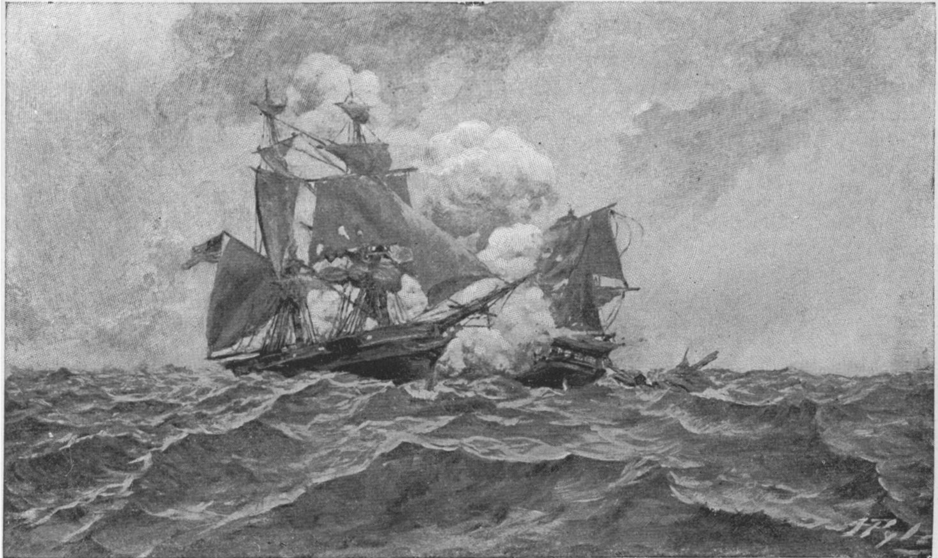
AN ILLUSTRATION BY HOWARD PYLE

ART AND PROGRESS

VOLUME VI OCTOBER 1915 NUMBER 12



FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE HOWARD PYLE

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HOWARD PYLE

BY FRANK E. SCHOONOVER

IT is not the purpose of this article to recount by successive stages the history of the art of Howard Pyle nor to dwell at length upon any single one of the thousands of his illustrations.*

If the author can draw aside, for a moment, the veil that surrounded the intimate life that existed between Howard Pyle and his pupils and by concrete example give the reader an inkling of the generous and lovable character of the man who was able, by unaided efforts to place upon the page of illustrative art the seal of the master—then the mission of this story will have been accomplished. For as Mr. Kenyon Cox says: "You cannot have the art without the man, and when you have the man you have the art."

* * *

Howard Pyle was practically a self-taught artist. Apart from a short time spent in New York and at Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, about all of his work was done in Wilmington, Del. There he built himself a studio and later in 1900, upon the same plot of ground, a second building wherein he conducted a school for a number of years. His earlier work, from the first published drawing, about the year 1876, to 1894 (when he became the Director of Illustration at Drexel Institute) was produced without the use of full color. During that time he achieved for himself the lasting name of one of the greatest, if not the greatest illustrator in black and white the world has ever seen.

*The greater part of Howard Pyle's work was identified with the Harper publications, and it is through their generosity that the article is illuminated with reproductions of his work.

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But even at that time a strong sense of color pervaded his work. There was a fine distinction of tone value and suggestion of absolute color as had not been produced before by means of such a limited palette. There was a difference between the green coat and the red vest. The vivid heat of a tropical sun and the cool of the shadow were all faithfully translated, and the reader has but to refer to the reproductions accompanying the article to more fully understand what might seem to the average observer to be quite impossible—that is, to produce color effects with the use of no color at all.

It was not entirely a sense of color and a knowledge of drawing that made his illustrations what they were: there was a "something" infinitely greater in them—an actual living in his creations that lifted them, even in the early efforts, from the commonplace. That particular truth in his work that Mr. Pyle called "mental projection" will be dwelt upon later.

Up to the time of his Drexel experience and his establishing a summer-school at Chadds Ford, Howard Pyle had not accustomed himself to the use of a full palette. But when the duties of an instructor devolved upon him, it became necessary to instruct in color. And it is from that time his professional life was very closely interwoven with that of the pupil. He developed his own art even as he brought out the art of those under him. He often said he secured much more from the pupil than he gave. That may have been true, but it is absolutely certain that to those pupils who studied with him and whose work appears nowadays in the various periodicals and upon the walls of various institutions, there was given a practical foundation in art such as could be secured in no other school. Certainly a sense of eternal obligation should be theirs, for he saved them at least five to ten years of laborious efforts to "arrive." And not one penny for instruction was charged for all the many hours he gave to his school in Wilmington.

Surely no man without a soul possessed of unbounded love for his fellow creatures and withal as honest of purpose would have given so freely of his precious time to his students. I mention this because it may give to the reader a somewhat better understanding of Howard Pyle's own character and of why it was so much of the charm of life and that same love of humanity appears in his paintings.

It was his great desire to instill in the minds of the students his ideas and methods so that they would be carried on after his death. This, he felt, could be better done in a school of his own rather than in a single department of a large institution. And so there came about, while the summer school was in progress at Chadds Ford, the inception of what eventually proved to be his school of illustration in Wilmington. Here it was, by means principally of a class in composition, that he endeavored to make the pupil think for himself. He strove to stimulate and help the imagination with the ultimate idea always to make the picture *practical and of some use in the world.* And to this end there was always the physical example of his own productions. We were called, now and then, to come within his own work-shop, there to see the pictures that might be under way. Very often, then, he would talk to us about art, and it seemed to me then and even stronger now in memory, that the great artist was, at such times, very close to the great truths of art. He would caution the young student not to be led astray by fancies and trickery, but to hold up always the mirror of nature as a supreme guide.

And it might not be amiss to illustrate by a concrete example, Howard Pyle's great love for nature and his insatiable longing to open the eyes of his pupils to the same wondrous truths.

It was his custom to take us upon frequent excursions through the low hill country of Chadds Ford. Upon these gentle voyages through field and woodland, there was the subtle pointing out of a purple, of broken color in a whitewashed wall, of all the delicate gradations of tone and value, the knowledge of which is not always accredited to the varied equipment of an illustrator.

I recall most vividly an October day, clear and cool, with a touch of winter in the hazy air. With easel and canvas within the shadow of a barn Mr. Pyle had been working from the models—a team of white

WALKING THE PLANK HOWARD PYLE

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MAROONED — HOWARD PYLE

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horses and a plough-boy, posing in the autumn sunlight. As the light of afternoon faded and the chill of a frosty air crept up from the valley, the artist laid aside the brushes and called some of his pupils to go with him in search of adventure. We were glad to relax and to enter into a short interval of, perhaps, well-earned rest. We followed the windings of a small stream that brought us finally to a broad opening and the summit of a hill. On the crest of this gentle knoll stood an oak—a wonderful, radiant picture, silhouetted against the sky. Mr. Pyle stopped and drank it in as one athirst.

"Look," he said, "just look at it!"

"It's like the exquisite creation of a worker in metal, a great yellow thing with plate after plate of burnished gold towering up against the arch of heaven."

"Yes, that is it," he continued, with a tenderness and reverence so characteristic of him.

"After all, it is not a mere inanimate tree with its leaf turned yellow, it's fashioned as a human being with a trunk, arms and fingers, all clothed in shining garments, standing there to reflect the glory of the Divine Maker."

How simple and how true it was. I doubt if a single one present that October day has forgotten the translation of what might otherwise have appealed as commonplace, into a world of divine purpose, leagues beyond the shell that surrounded our own feeble efforts.

Of such a nature were the lasting truths gathered upon those pleasant walks of a late afternoon with Howard Pyle acting as interpreter and friend.

That appreciation of the basic truths of nature, with its fragmentary groups of human beings, was divided and subdivided by Mr. Pyle into the most minute detail. Nothing seemed to be too small for careful consideration. In working upon his own pictures, after the broad lay-in, he would complete part with a loving care, that to use his own phraseology "was the projecting of one's mind into the picture and the elimination of one's self." "It was not sufficient," he would state, "to say here we will have a field with perhaps a man ploughing. Such a statement means nothing more to the observer than the usual observation that 'this is a fine day.' But when that self-same field is divided into its gentle slopes and rises, with its growth of grasses and flowering things; with the play of sunlight and the shadow of the soaring hawk; when the ploughman becomes a real personality and when the flock of crows follows the freshly turned furrow—then, and only then does the artist lift the man and the field from the commonplace into the realm of true art."

When such a picture is painted the layman is interested and the artist wonders why he never thought of it in just that way.

That careful consideration of detail and thought of the subject as has just been mentioned, was one of the lessons Mr. Pyle endeavored to teach his pupils. He had mastered it himself. By a quarter of a century of work; in the production of thousands of drawings, he had worked out what he called "The Theory of Mental Projection." This theory being the "something" in his art that was mentioned earlier in the article.

What is meant by the theory of mental projection?

It is more than obvious from the bare statement that it has to do with projecting one's mind into the subject in hand, whether it be, as in Howard Pyle's case, painting or writing. But that is not sufficient. The product of the mind plus one's individuality very often accompany one another in this matter of mental projection. The product then becomes a mannerism and not a masterpiece. But when the soul of the mind evolves a thought, first in its entirety and then in its most minute detail and the picture is painted with all of its color upon that curtain that covers the soul of the mind: then if the artist has the power to reproduce that on canvas without any interference of his own preconceived idea, then indeed has he mastered that truth Mr. Pyle so aptly called "Mental Projection."

Let us for a moment see wherein Howard Pyle's pictures exemplify this theory. His paintings of American colonial life and those of the Buccaneer are known throughout the world. It is not that they are well composed and well drawn; they are, to be sure. But they breathe forth such a veritable atmosphere of truth that they seem to be contemporary and not a product of

VIEWING THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL HOWARD PYLE

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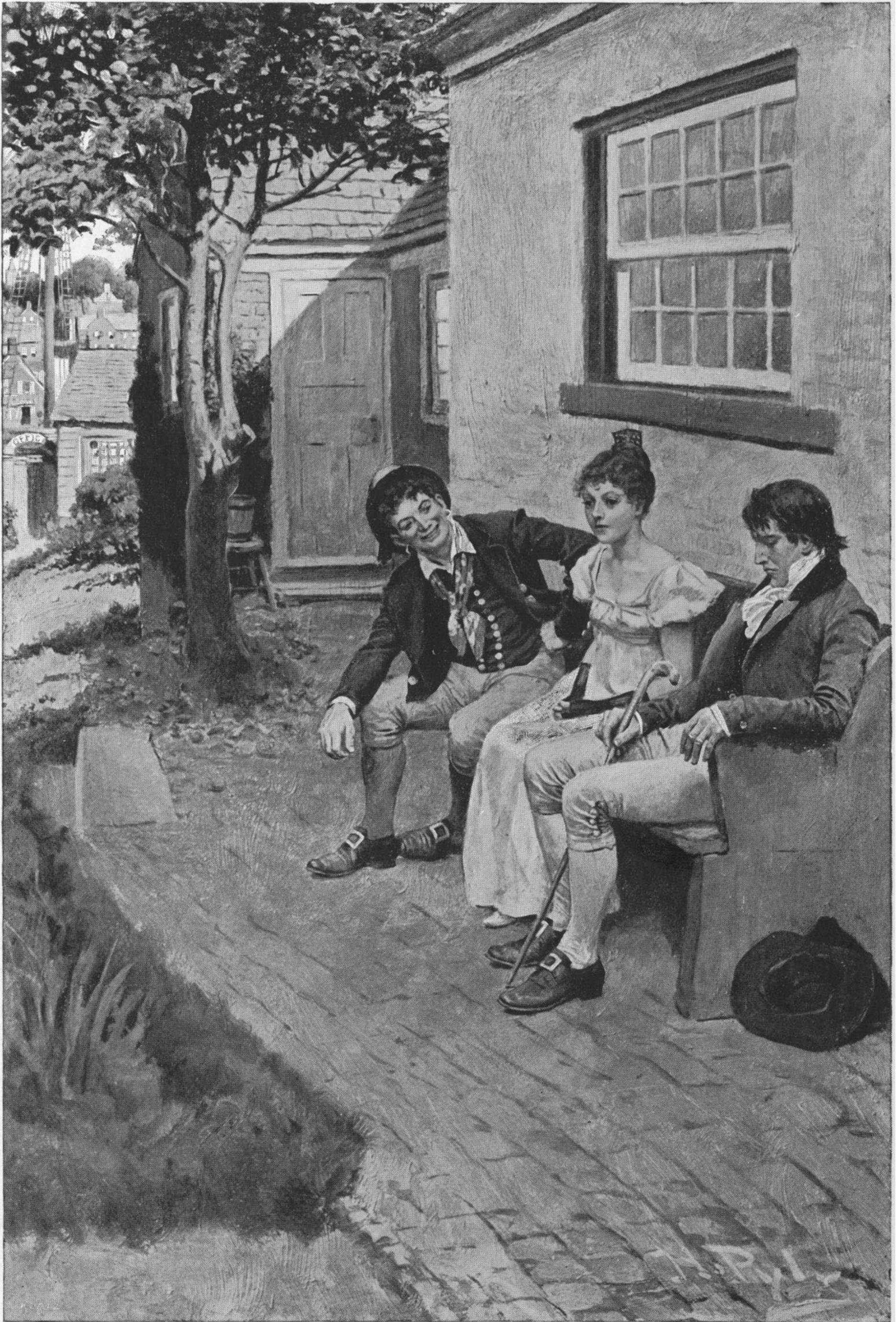

A SAILOR'S SWEETHEART HOWARD PYLE

FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE., COPYRIGHT, 1895, BY HARPER & BROTHERS

the present day. It mattered not if it was the struggling continental or the swaggering buccaneer; within the four walls of the Wilmington studio there lived for the time Blackbeard and Kidd with the flaming tropical sky and the treasure of the dead. And then by way of contrast to such pictures, the great Washington; the suffering men at Valley Forge; and the many dramatic incidents pertaining to the saving of a nation, are visualized upon the canvas. How difficult and yet how simple when one has mastered the problem of mental projection.

When Howard Pyle was painting "The Battle of Bunker Hill," he told the writer he could actually smell the smoke of the conflict and if his fellow workers in New York called him "The Bloody Quaker" it was only because he so lived in his work he actually seemed to have that element existent in his physical being. As a matter of fact Howard Pyle was always a gentle man, kind, loving and generous—generous to a fault. But it was the ability to live in the picture that, for the moment, transformed him to the character he was painting.

This theory of mental projection was ever uppermost in his mind even in the moments of relaxation and play.

I recall just such another fall day at Chadds Ford, such as I have described before—save that it was later in the month of October. Mr. Pyle had been working hard all day and late in the afternoon, as was his custom, he asked some of the students to go with him for a walk across the fields. We discovered later the real object was to gather some nuts that ripened during the cold nights. Now it so happened the hickory trees bordered a small stream and many of the nuts had dropped into the clear cold water. We gathered all we could find about on the ground and then looked with longing eyes at the yellow spots on the creek-bed.

"Well," said Mr. Pyle, "it's a pity to leave those nuts; they're very good, and there's only one way to get them."

With that he removed his shoes and stockings, rolled up his trousers and waded into that icy water. With sweater and shirt sleeves turned back he went about salvaging the nuts. Some of us followed and shortly the stream was entirely cleared. There followed then one of those wonderful moments that illuminated just what Mr. Pyle meant by projecting one's self in the picture. The water was cold; it was icy cold, and suddenly Mr. Pyle realized that fact—now that the fun was over. Turning to us he said with great emphasis and with a favorite expression:

"By Jove!" boys, "this is the sort of thing you must get into your work. If you are painting the icy water you must feel it. The poor fellow at Valley Forge felt it and so did the ragged lot that marched on the Hessians at Trenton. I don't believe it's possible to paint a picture of that kind unless you feel the cold even as you feel it now!"

We stepped from the stream, clothed ourselves, gathered the baskets and trudged homeward across the fields. In such a manner was a great truth driven home. Some thirteen years later Mr. Pyle laid aside his brushes forever.

* * *

Beyond that ancient art center, Florence, on the road to Chertosa, stands a Presbyterian cemetery. And there, among many inscriptions to those who have passed, is this simple statement:

HOWARD PYLE
Born March 5, 1853
Died Nov. 9, 1911

The usual competitions for the American Academy in Rome Fellowships were held this year and announcement of the winners has recently been made as follows: The Fellowship in Architecture was awarded to Philip T. Shutze, of Columbia University and Georgia School of Technology; the Fellowship in Painting was awarded to Russell Cowles, National Academy of Design, New York; the Fellowship in Sculpture was awarded to Joseph E. Renier, National Academy of Design, New York; and the Fellowship in Landscape Architecture was awarded to Edward G. Lawson, Cornell University. The works submitted in competition this year were notable as being of a higher grade than those of any previous competition of the Academy. The winners are expected to arrive in Rome by October 1st.